

The background of the entire page is a dark, atmospheric illustration. It depicts a large, multi-story house with a prominent tower and a full moon in the background. The scene is set at night, with the moon casting a soft glow. The house has several windows, some of which are lit, suggesting an interior light source. The overall mood is mysterious and somewhat eerie, fitting for a book about living with a chronic condition like asthma.

BREATHING AGAINST THE WIND

Living with Asthma

Blessings Bakali

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Dedication

To my parents, who never gave up on me.

Your love has been my medicine, your strength my breath, and your faith the wind beneath my fragile lungs.

Preface

I have lived most of my life counting breaths. Not in fear, but in gratitude. Each breath I take is a small victory a quiet reminder that even fragile lungs can carry a strong spirit.

When I was born in Chiradzulu District Hospital on the 26th of March, 2004, no one imagined that my life would be marked by the sound of wheezing and gasps for air. Yet here I am today, a university student, breathing against the wind and walking proudly with the story that once felt like a curse.

I decided to write this book to help others understand what asthma truly is. In our communities, many still see it as a strange illness or even a spiritual problem. Some call it “the disease of the chest,” while others simply think of it as being weak. But living with asthma has taught me that weakness is not in the body it is in giving up.

Through this story, I want to speak to every child who sits out of a football match because they cannot breathe. I want to speak to every mother who stays up all night, watching her child fight for air. And I want to remind every person living with asthma that they are not defined by it. You can live, study, dream, and succeed one breath at a time.

This book is not written in big medical words. It is a simple story, my story from the dusty roads of Putheya Village to the lecture halls of the University of Malawi. Along the way, I will share not only the pain but also the hope, the laughter, the lessons, and the strength that came from living with a condition that tried, but never managed, to silence me.

If this book can teach one person to understand asthma better, or inspire one patient to keep fighting, then my purpose will be fulfilled.

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To my family, whose love and care gave me strength during difficult moments of illness thank you for your constant support. To my friends and colleagues who encouraged me to keep writing, your belief in me gave this story life.

I also extend appreciation to all individuals and organizations working tirelessly to improve asthma awareness and healthcare in Malawi. This book is for every person who has ever struggled to breathe yet found the courage to keep going.

Finally, to every reader thank you for taking the time to understand this story. May it inspire empathy, awareness, and hope.

Blessings Bakali

The Breath of Life

I was born in the early hours of the morning, under the soft light of March 26th, 2004. My mother always tells me that the day was calm not too hot, not too cold just the right weather for a baby to arrive. But calmness did not last long. Two weeks after my birth, my parents noticed something unusual. I would struggle to breathe, my small chest rising and falling too quickly, making a faint whistling sound with every breath.

At first, my mother thought it was just a common cough, maybe a cold. But my father, who had seen similar signs before, knew something was not right. They rushed me to Chiradzulu District Hospital, where a nurse examined me carefully. She listened to my chest, paused for a moment, and said softly, "This baby has asthma."

My mother says, her heart sank. She didn't understand what asthma was. In our village, people talked more about malaria, coughs, or pneumonia but asthma sounded like something from another world. That day marked the beginning of a journey that would shape every part of my life.

Growing up in Putheya Village under Traditional Authority Ntchema, life was simple. We had gardens to tend, goats to herd, and stories to tell around the fire. The air smelled of soil after rain,

and the wind from the hills carried the laughter of children playing football on the dusty ground. I wanted to be one of those children, running freely, but my body had other plans.

My parents learned quickly how to care for me. They always kept me away from the cold, covered me with blankets during windy evenings, and made sure I avoided smoke from cooking fires. Still, attacks would come suddenly without warning. One moment I would be laughing, and the next I would be gasping, trying to pull air into lungs that refused to open.

When those moments came, everything stopped. My mother would rush for the pills, sometimes giving me warm water to calm me down. I remember the fear in her eyes, the trembling in her hands as she tried to help me breathe. My father would stand by the door, praying silently. It was not easy for them, raising a child who could be healthy in the morning and fighting for his life by evening.

The doctors at Chiradzulu taught my parents how to manage the condition. They said asthma is not something that can be cured, but it can be controlled. I was too young to understand what that meant, but I could feel that my parents carried that knowledge like a fragile egg careful, protective, and always hopeful.

As I grew older, I began to understand my limits. I couldn't play too long under the sun or run around when the air was dusty. I admired my friends who could run, jump, and wrestle without thinking twice about breathing. For me, every movement required thought. Every laugh was followed by caution. Every cold season brought a new round of fear.

Still, I found joy in small things. I loved reading it didn't require running or shouting. Books became my escape, my playground. My teachers at Chipere Primary noticed that I enjoyed stories, and they often asked me to read aloud during lessons. My voice was calm and clear, though sometimes interrupted by soft coughs. That was how I began to build my confidence through words, not running shoes.

Asthma became part of my identity, though I didn't like it. People in the village called me "the one who coughs all the time." Some even thought it was a curse or a sign of weakness. But my parents always told me, "Blessings, God has a reason for everything. Even this." Their words gave me comfort, though sometimes I still wondered why God had chosen this path for me.

One night, when I was about six years old, I had one of the worst attacks of my life. It was the middle of the night. The air was cold and thin. I woke up coughing, gasping for air. My chest felt

like it was tied with a tight rope. My mother heard me and jumped from her bed. She held me in her arms as my father ran outside to look for help. I remember hearing her whisper, "Don't leave me, my son. Please breathe."

At that moment, I truly thought I was going to die. But somehow, after what felt like forever, my breathing eased. The pills began to work, and the pressure in my chest slowly loosened. That night changed me. It taught me that every breath I take is a gift one I should never take for granted.

From then on, I stopped seeing asthma as something that only brought pain. It became a teacher. It taught me patience, discipline, and gratitude. It showed me the strength of my parents' love and the fragility of life itself.

Even though my lungs were weak, my dreams were strong. I told myself that I might not run the fastest, but I could still go far in my own way. I just needed to find a different kind of strength.

And so began my journey of learning to live not in fear of the wind, but with it breathing against it when I must.

Growing Up with the Whistle in My Chest

I grew up knowing the sound of my own breath better than the sound of rain on a tin roof. When other children heard thunder and ran to watch the clouds gather, I listened for the tiny whistle inside my chest that thin note that told me whether the air was friendly or turning against me.

As I began to walk and talk, my mother watched me closely. She used to say she could tell how the day would go by listening to my breathing in the morning. If my chest was quiet and clear, she smiled; if she heard a rattle, she already knew it would be a long day. Asthma was like a fifth child in our home one that demanded attention every single day.

Life in Putheya Village was humble but full of warmth. The houses were simple, built from mud bricks, thatched with grass that glowed golden in the dry season. I remember the smell of maize flour roasting in the morning, the laughter of my cousins, and the dust that hung in the air after we swept the yard. That same dust was my enemy. I loved helping to sweep, but every time I did, I would end up wheezing. My mother would shout gently, “Eee, Blessings, leave that broom alone! You’ll start again!”

I often felt left out. When other boys chased after footballs made of plastic bags, I stood on the sidelines, cheering. Sometimes I would try to join, but within minutes my chest would tighten and I would bend over, fighting for air. The boys would stop, some laughing, others looking worried. “Aah, leave him; he’s got that breathing thing,” one would say. Those words stung more than the pain in my chest.

At night, when everyone else slept soundly, I lay awake listening to my breath. It had different songs sometimes a soft hum, sometimes a deep groan. My parents would wake up at the slightest cough. They were always alert, like guards protecting a fortress. I later realised that their sleepless nights were acts of love I could never repay.

During cold seasons, my mother tied a scarf around my nose and mouth whenever I went outside. I used to hate it. Children would laugh, saying I looked like an old woman. But she would only say, “Let them laugh; at least you’ll breathe.” I did not understand then, but I do now a parent’s love is stronger than embarrassment.

My grandmother also played a big part in my early life. She was a believer in both prayer and home remedies. She would boil guava leaves and tell me to breathe in the steam, saying, “This will open your chest, my son.” Sometimes it helped,

sometimes it didn't, but it always comforted me. The warmth of that steam felt like a hug. She would sit beside me, telling stories about her youth, and somehow her words distracted me from the tightness in my lungs.

School life was a mixture of hope and fear. I wanted to learn, to make my parents proud, but the road to Chipere Primary was long and dusty. On windy days, the dust rose like smoke. My classmates would cover their faces with pieces of cloth, but I would still start coughing halfway there. Some mornings I stayed home, and I could hear the voices of children singing from the classroom across the field. I felt left behind, but I also knew that resting could mean surviving another day.

My parents always reminded me that education was my future. They told me that even if my body was weak, my mind could be strong. So when I did make it to school, I sat in front, close to the teacher, taking in every word. My teachers were kind. They knew my condition and often excused me from sweeping or carrying heavy things. Still, I wanted to be treated like everyone else. There were days I insisted on playing, refusing to admit that I was different, and those were the days I ended up sick again.

One afternoon, while I was in Standard Four, an attack came suddenly during class. It started with

a small cough, then the whistle, then a tightness so strong that I couldn't speak. My teacher stopped the lesson immediately. I remember her lifting me onto her back and running to the head teacher's office. From there, someone called my father, who arrived on a bicycle, pedalling as if his life depended on it. He took me straight to Chiradzulu Hospital. I don't remember much of the journey only the blur of trees and the rhythm of his voice saying, "Hold on, my boy, just hold on."

That day made me realise how serious asthma was. I began to fear my own body not because I hated it, but because I didn't understand why it turned against me. I asked God many times, "Why me?" And though there was no answer, deep inside I started believing there must be a reason. Maybe I was meant to learn strength the hard way.

My friends sometimes visited when I was sick. They would bring me small gifts mangoes, sugarcane, or roasted maize. They didn't know what to say, but their presence meant everything. I learned early that kindness doesn't need big words.

Those early years taught me to live carefully. I avoided smoke, cold air, and too much excitement. But I never avoided life. My parents made sure of that. They reminded me daily that I

was more than my sickness that I was a child of promise. And so, even with a whistle in my chest, I learned to sing my own song.

Chiperere Days

When I joined Chiperere Primary School properly, around Standard Five, I already knew the rhythm of my illness. Mornings were better; nights were dangerous. I carried my small bottle of pills everywhere like a secret weapon. My friends called them “Blessings’ magic sweets.” To me, they were the line between comfort and crisis.

School at Chiperere was lively. The classrooms had cracked walls and dusty floors, but the energy of children made them feel alive. We wrote on old wooden desks, sharing pencils that were sharpened until they were too short to hold. Despite everything, I loved learning. It was the one thing my lungs couldn’t take away from me.

Every morning began with assembly. We sang the national anthem under the sun, voices rising into the sky. I sang softly, careful not to overexert myself. My teacher, Madam Mbewe, often watched me from the corner of her eye. She was a tall woman with a strict face but a kind heart. She once told me, “Blessings, never think you are less. You may breathe differently, but your brain breathes just fine.” Those words became my shield.

Still, school had its challenges. The chalk dust in the classroom was one of my biggest enemies. Every time the teacher wrote on the blackboard, white clouds filled the air, and I would start sneezing and coughing. I tried to hold my breath until the dust settled, but sometimes I couldn't. The other pupils laughed, not out of cruelty but ignorance. To them, it was funny. To me, it was pain.

I learned to sit near the window where fresh air came in. Sometimes the teacher forgot to open it, and I would quietly stretch my hand to do it myself. Little adjustments like that kept me going. Asthma taught me awareness to notice every smell, every breeze, every sign that the air might turn bad.

Despite my struggles, I was among the top pupils in class. Reading and writing came naturally to me. During English lessons, I loved to read stories aloud. My voice might break with a cough, but I never stopped. The teachers praised me, and that encouragement gave me purpose. I started dreaming of becoming something big at first, a surgeon. I imagined myself saving lives, especially those who couldn't breathe like me.

But as I grew older and began to learn more about chemicals and operating rooms, I realised that my own health might not allow it. The strong smells, the long hours, the stress all of it could

trigger attacks. Accepting that reality was painful. It felt like the wind had blown away my dream. But my father told me, “Son, the world has many ways to help people. Maybe your words will heal where your hands cannot.” That’s when I started thinking about communication, about using my voice to make change.

The journey to school was always long. During the rainy season, the roads became rivers of mud. Sometimes I slipped and soaked my uniform, but I kept walking because I wanted to learn. My friends teased me for being slow, but they also respected my persistence. When I reached Standard Eight, the head teacher said to me, “Blessings, if courage could breathe, it would sound like you.”

Exams came, and I passed well enough to earn a place at Malimba Secondary School. My parents were overjoyed, though also anxious. Secondary school meant leaving home for longer hours and facing new environments environments I couldn’t control. But they believed in me, and that belief was stronger than fear.

Before I left Chipere, my teachers gathered in the staffroom and prayed for me. Madam Mbewe hugged me tightly and whispered, “Go and show them that even the weak can be strong.” I promised her I would. As I walked home that day, the wind blew softly through the trees. For once,

I didn't dread it. I lifted my head, took a deep breath, and smiled. The whistle in my chest was quiet. It was one of those rare, peaceful days when the world seemed to breathe with me.

The Weight of Breath at Malimba

Starting secondary school at Malimba felt like stepping into a bigger world one filled with excitement, fear, and responsibility. I still remember the morning I left Putheya Village for the first time with a suitcase that was almost bigger than me. My mother had packed everything neatly: soap, notebooks, my tablets, and a small blanket. Before I boarded the minibus, she held my shoulders and said, “My son, remember to breathe before you speak. Take care of yourself before you take care of school.”

The school sat on a hill, surrounded by blue gum trees that whistled whenever the wind passed through. The air was cleaner than in the village, but sometimes too cold in the mornings. On my first day, I could feel the weight of my breath again not because of illness, but because of nerves. I was stepping into a place where nobody knew me, and nobody knew my story.

The classrooms were bigger, the lessons harder, and the students came from different parts of the district. Some were loud and confident; others quiet and focused. I tried to blend in quietly, listening more than speaking. But soon enough, the whisper of my inhaler gave me away. The first time I used it in class, a few students looked

at me curiously. One even asked, “Eeh, Blessings, what is that thing you are smoking?” I laughed awkwardly and said, “It helps me breathe.” That day, I realised that my asthma would always introduce me before I did.

The first term was tough. Between classes, assignments, and daily chores, I often found myself exhausted. The dormitories were crowded, and dust from old mattresses filled the air. Many nights, I woke up coughing, trying not to disturb others. Sometimes I went outside just to feel the cold air against my face, even though I knew it could trigger another attack. I missed home the care of my parents, the warmth of our small house, the prayers whispered in the dark.

But I also began to grow stronger. The school nurse kept an eye on me and ensured I never missed my pills. My friends learned how to help me during attacks they would bring water, open windows, and sit with me until my breathing calmed. Their kindness made me realise that friendship could be medicine too.

One day, during a Biology lesson, the teacher explained how the lungs work the alveoli, the bronchi, the oxygen exchange. I listened with fascination and fear. As he spoke, I imagined the tiny passages inside my own lungs tightening and loosening like stubborn doors. I wanted to raise

my hand and tell him, “I know how it feels when those doors refuse to open,” but I kept quiet.

Despite my health challenges, I performed well academically. Reading and writing became my comfort. I joined the school journalism club because it allowed me to tell stories without running or shouting. I loved interviewing teachers and students, turning their experiences into small articles that we pinned to the notice board. That was when my love for communication truly began to bloom.

Still, there were dark days. I remember one cold morning when I collapsed outside the dormitory. My chest felt heavy, like someone had placed a stone on it. I could hear my friends shouting my name, their voices distant. When I opened my eyes, I was in the school clinic, with the nurse sitting beside me. She smiled and said, “You’re back, my boy. You gave us a scare.” I smiled weakly. Moments like those reminded me that life was fragile but also that it was worth fighting for.

As the years passed, I learned how to balance my health and my dreams. I carried my medication everywhere, avoided dusty sports fields, and rested when I needed to. Some teachers admired my discipline; others thought I was too cautious. But I knew that every decision I made could be the difference between breathing and suffocating.

During my final year, as I prepared for the MSCE exams, I faced one of the worst attacks in months. It came in the middle of the night, during revision week. I had pushed myself too hard, staying up late and forgetting to take breaks. When the attack struck, I fell to the floor, struggling for air. My roommate, Joseph, shouted for help, and soon the nurse arrived. She gave me oxygen and stayed by my side until morning. I missed classes for a few days, but when I returned, I was determined to finish strong.

When the exam results came, I had passed with good grades. My parents cried when they heard the news. They said, "God has been faithful." I knew they were right. My breath, though often fragile, had carried me this far.

As I looked toward the next chapter of my life university I felt ready, not because my lungs had healed, but because my spirit had.

Family, Love, and Care

If there is one thing that kept me alive through the storms of asthma, it was love the love of family that never wavered, even when hope seemed small.

My parents were the pillars of my life. My father, though a quiet man, had strength that spoke louder than words. He was a farmer, and every day before going to the field, he checked on me. “How is the chest today?” he would ask, using his rough hand to feel my forehead. My mother, on the other hand, was a gentle warrior. She knew the smell of my sickness she could tell an attack was coming even before I did.

They carried my burden as if it were theirs. When I was too weak to go to school, my mother would sit beside me, humming old hymns. When attacks struck at night, my father would wrap me in a blanket and ride with me on his bicycle to the nearest health centre. Sometimes the roads were muddy, sometimes it rained, but he never stopped pedalling. I grew up seeing love not in words, but in actions in the calloused hands that refused to give up on me.

My siblings also learned to adjust their lives around mine. They helped with chores when I was unwell and shared their laughter when I was

better. They teased me gently, calling me “Doctor B,” saying I would one day find a cure for myself. In those moments, laughter became another form of healing.

Extended family and neighbours played their part too. In the village, community is everything. During difficult nights, someone always came to help. Aunties brought herbal concoctions; uncles offered transport; elders prayed over me. Though not every method worked medically, every gesture carried hope. And sometimes, hope itself was enough to ease my breathing.

There were also moments of misunderstanding. Some villagers believed asthma was caused by evil spirits or witchcraft. I remember once overhearing an old man say, “This boy was bewitched. That’s why he can’t breathe like others.” It hurt, but my parents shielded me from such talk. They explained to people that asthma was a real illness not a curse, not a punishment. In their small way, they became teachers of awareness long before I ever thought of writing this book.

As I grew older, I began to understand how much they had sacrificed. The money spent on hospital trips could have bought seeds or livestock. The nights they stayed awake could have been nights of rest. Yet they never complained. They saw my

survival as their blessing perhaps that's how I got my name, Blessings.

When I left for the University of Malawi, it was both a proud and painful moment. My parents had never been to college themselves, so seeing their son reach that level filled them with joy. But they also worried constantly. My mother packed my bag with medicine, warm clothes, and food. "You must never skip your pills," she reminded me, "and don't pretend to be strong when you are not." My father added, "Education is good, but your breath is life. Protect it."

Even now, at university, their voices live in my head. Whenever I feel short of breath, I remember my mother's humming and my father's bicycle wheels cutting through the mud. That memory steadies me.

Family taught me that asthma may weaken the lungs, but it cannot weaken love. It showed me that healing doesn't always come from hospitals sometimes it comes from hands that hold you, words that encourage you, and hearts that refuse to let you go.

Understanding Asthma What It Really Is?

For most of my childhood, I only knew asthma as that thing that made me wheeze and rush to the hospital. I didn't understand what was really happening inside me. Grown-ups would whisper words like "attack," "inhaler," and "trigger," but to me, it all felt like a mystery. It was not until secondary school and later at university that I began to truly learn what this illness was about.

Asthma, as I came to understand, is not just a cough. It is a lifelong condition that affects the lungs especially the airways, which are the small tubes that carry air in and out. For most people, those airways stay open and flexible. But for people like me, they become overly sensitive. Small things like dust, smoke, perfume, cold air, or even laughter can make them tighten. When that happens, air struggles to move, and I begin to wheeze that whistling sound people hear when I'm trying to breathe.

In my early years, I thought it was something that would go away with age, like malaria or flu. But as I grew older, I realised asthma is more like a stubborn companion one that never leaves, but can be managed with care and understanding. Doctors explained that my lungs would always be sensitive, but if I followed medication,

avoided triggers, and lived a healthy lifestyle, I could live a full and productive life.

It took me time to accept that reality. I used to feel ashamed whenever I had an attack in public. People would stare, unsure what to do. Some even backed away, afraid it was contagious. But gradually, I began to see the importance of speaking out of helping others understand that asthma is not a curse, not a weakness, but a condition that requires awareness, support, and compassion.

Asthma attacks are not the same for everyone. For me, they begin with a tightness in my chest, followed by shortness of breath. Then comes the wheezing and coughing. Sometimes, I feel dizzy or lightheaded, as if the world is spinning. The scariest part is when words stop coming out when I can only point or gesture. That's when I know it's serious.

The first rule of managing asthma is knowing your triggers. I discovered mine early: dust, cold weather, strong smells, and stress. Once I understood these, I learned to adjust my habits. I avoided sweeping without a mask, stayed away from smoke, and always carried my inhaler. I also began to educate friends about what to do if an attack happened open windows, keep me calm, and fetch my medication.

Many people in Malawi still think asthma is rare, but it's more common than we realise. I've met other students, teachers, and even health workers who struggle silently with it. Some are afraid to talk about it, fearing stigma. That's why awareness is so important. When people understand asthma, they respond better during emergencies, they offer empathy instead of fear, and they support healthier environments.

There is no cure for asthma, but there is control. And that control starts with understanding. When you know your body, you can live in peace with it. I may not breathe as freely as others, but every breath I take is a victory. Every morning I wake up without wheezing feels like a small miracle one that reminds me to keep teaching others what I've learned through pain and patience.

Medication and Management

Medication has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. My relationship with pills and inhalers is as old as my memories. In my family, we often joked that my bag was half books, half medicine.

When I was younger, my parents were the ones who managed everything. They made sure I took the right tablets and used my inhaler at the right time. But as I grew older, I had to take responsibility for myself. I learned the names of my medicines, the dosages, and the difference between relievers and preventers.

The reliever inhaler, usually blue, is the one I use when I feel tightness or wheezing. It works fast, relaxing my airways and allowing me to breathe. The preventer inhaler, on the other hand, is used daily to reduce inflammation in my lungs even when I'm not having symptoms. At first, I used to forget it often, but after several attacks, I learned my lesson: consistency is life.

I also take pills prescribed by doctors mostly to strengthen my lungs and reduce allergic reactions. Each medication has a role, and skipping one can throw everything off balance. I always remind others living with asthma: medicine only works when you use it properly.

There were times when access to medication became difficult. In the village, hospitals sometimes ran out of stock, and pharmacies were too far. My parents had to travel long distances or borrow from relatives. Those experiences taught me that asthma management is not just a personal battle it's also a community and health-system challenge. Awareness must go hand in hand with accessibility.

University life added another layer of difficulty. Balancing studies, social activities, and health management was not easy. There were times I ran out of inhalers during exam periods. Once, I had an attack in the library after an all-night study session. My friends rushed me to the clinic, and I realised I had ignored my body's warnings again. Since then, I made a rule for myself: my health comes first. A degree is meaningless if I cannot breathe to celebrate it.

Apart from medicine, lifestyle also matters. I learned to eat foods that support my lungs fruits, vegetables, and water instead of fizzy drinks. Exercise in moderation helps, too, though I avoid dusty or cold areas. I also practice deep breathing exercises. Sometimes, when I feel anxious or short of breath, I sit still, close my eyes, and slowly inhale through my nose and exhale through my mouth. It helps calm both my body and my mind.

But above all, I learned to listen to my body. Asthma speaks through tightness, coughing, and tiredness. Ignoring it is dangerous. Listening, on the other hand, saves lives.

I often meet people who stop their medication when they start feeling better. I understand the temptation the desire to believe you are healed. But asthma is a patient teacher: it punishes carelessness. Once you stop treatment abruptly, the symptoms return, often worse than before. I've learned that managing asthma means embracing discipline, even when it feels tiring.

In my journey, I've met kind doctors and nurses who taught me patience. I've also met others who didn't understand the daily struggles of chronic illness. That's why I dream of a Malawi where every health worker is trained not just to treat, but also to listen to see beyond the wheezing and recognise the human being behind it.

Medication and management are not just about survival; they are about dignity. Taking control of my health has given me a sense of power a quiet kind of strength that comes from knowing I can face whatever comes next, one breath at a time.

Dreams Rewritten Letting Go of Surgery and Finding Broadcasting

As a child, I dreamed of becoming a surgeon. I was fascinated by the way doctors in white coats moved through hospital corridors, saving lives with steady hands. I used to imagine myself standing in an operating room, breathing through a mask, giving people a second chance at life. Every time I was admitted to the hospital, I would stare at the doctors with admiration. I thought, One day, I'll be like them I'll heal others the way they heal me.

But as I grew older, that dream began to fade, not because I stopped loving medicine, but because I began to understand my own limitations. The first time I handled chemicals during a school lab experiment, I started coughing uncontrollably. The smell of reagents filled my chest with fire. The teacher rushed me outside, and I sat on the grass, gasping for air. That day, I realised that my dream and my health were walking in different directions.

For weeks, I refused to accept it. I told myself I would get stronger, that one day my lungs would toughen up. But the more I tried, the clearer it became I could not survive in an environment

filled with chemicals and surgical fumes. It was painful to admit. Letting go of that dream felt like losing a part of myself.

I spent months thinking about what to do next. My parents noticed the change in me. One evening, as we sat by the fire, my mother asked softly, "My son, what troubles your heart?" I told her I feared I would never be useful to the world if I could not become a doctor. She smiled and said, "There are many ways to heal people. Some heal with their hands, others with their words."

Her words sank deep into my heart.

It was around that time that I began writing short stories and essays at school. My teachers encouraged me to join the debate club. I discovered that I enjoyed speaking not loudly, but sincerely. I liked the power of words, how they could comfort, educate, and inspire. During one of the school assemblies, I delivered a short speech about asthma awareness. I spoke about what it felt like to live with it, how others could help during attacks, and how to create cleaner environments. When I finished, there was silence then applause. For the first time, I realised that maybe my mother was right. Maybe I could heal with words.

From that day, my path began to shift. I started following news programs on MBC Radio and

reading articles from The Nation and Times Group. I admired broadcasters like Author Chokotho, Brian Banda and others who spoke with clarity and emotion, turning stories into lessons. I wanted to do the same to tell real stories that could touch lives.

By the time I finished secondary school, I had accepted that I might not wear a surgeon's mask, but I could still make people breathe easier not through medicine, but through awareness. I could use my voice to change how people understood asthma, health, and resilience.

When I got my admission letter to study Bachelor of Arts in Communication and Cultural Studies at the University of Malawi, I felt both joy and disbelief. It was as if life was saying, "You lost one dream, but gained another." Broadcasting became my new heartbeat. And though it was a different kind of healing, it was healing nonetheless.

I still admire doctors they are heroes to me. But I also believe storytellers are healers too. Through communication, we open minds, change behaviours, and bring comfort to those who think they are alone. In my journey, I have learned that purpose does not always look like what we imagined sometimes it comes disguised as loss, and sometimes it arrives quietly, like a soft breeze after a storm.

Campus Life and Advocacy

Life at the University of Malawi came with a mixture of freedom and responsibility. It was my first time living on my own, far from my parents' watchful eyes. For the first time, I had to manage everything my studies, meals, social life, and, most importantly, my health.

The campus was vibrant. Students came from all corners of Malawi Mzuzu, Blantyre, Lilongwe, Zomba. The diversity was beautiful. Everyone had a story, a dream, and a struggle. I quickly made friends who respected my calm nature. But they also noticed that I was not like most students I avoided smoky areas, didn't attend late-night parties, and always carried a small bag that rattled with pills.

At first, some found it strange. But with time, I opened up to them about my asthma. I explained what to do if I had an attack, where my inhaler was kept, and how to help me stay calm. The more I talked, the more people began to understand. Some even shared their own health issues. I realised that talking openly about asthma helped not only me but others too. It removed the fear and replaced it with empathy.

I started individual health-awareness. During World Asthma Day, I was invited to speak at a

community gathering. Standing on the stage, microphone in hand, I felt nervous but proud. I told my story how I was diagnosed at two weeks old, how my parents fought for my survival, and how I learned to live carefully but fully. When I finished, people came up to me, saying, “I never knew asthma could be so serious,” others “My cousin has asthma now I understand better.” Those moments reminded me why communication mattered.

Balancing academics and health is not always easy. There were days when I felt exhausted before even attending class. Some people were understanding, helping me to submit assignments in time when I was unwell. Others were strict, expecting me to keep up regardless. I learned to plan ahead to study early, to rest often, and to ask for help when I needed it.

University life also taught me independence in managing my condition. Back home, my parents always watched over me. But now, I had to remember my medication schedules and clinic visits by myself. I made a small notebook where I recorded everything medicine times, doctor appointments, even my triggers for the week. It helped me stay organised and in control.

My time at university is also deepening my desire to spread awareness. I began writing articles, focusing on health topics, especially asthma. I

shared practical tips how to respond during an attack, why keeping the environment clean matters, and how stigma can harm those with chronic illnesses. My friend Olivia Banda once told me, “Blessings, your words breathe life.” That compliment stays with me. It became the fuel that keeps me writing.

Apart from advocacy, campus life has its joyful moments too. I enjoy group discussions under the trees, laughter in the cafeteria, and quiet evenings in the library. I might have been limited in some activities, but I never felt left behind. My friends Conrad Kaunda, Blessings Makuta, Chimwemwe Kaliya, Thocco Yohane and others made sure of that. They treated me not as a patient, but as a person someone capable and valued.

During my first year, I faced one of the hardest semesters. The weather turned cold, and I suffered frequent attacks. I missed several lectures and fell behind in coursework. I considered taking a break from school, but my friends encouraged me to stay. Olivia Banda once said, “Blessings, sometimes education is not about running fast it’s about learning how to keep walking even when your breath is short.”

Those words touched me deeply.

I pushed through, slowly but steadily, until I recovered. When the semester ended, I had not

only passed but also grown mentally stronger. I realised that resilience is not the absence of weakness it is the courage to continue despite it.

Today, as I walk across campus, I feel a sense of pride. My breath may not always be steady, but my purpose is. I have become not just a student of communication, but also a communicator of hope. And that, to me, is the greatest lesson university has given.

Community Awareness and Giving Back

As I grew older and more confident in managing my asthma, I began to realise that surviving with this condition had given me a voice, a voice that could help others. In Malawi, especially in rural communities like mine, many people still lack proper knowledge about asthma. Some think it's a childhood illness that disappears with age, while others believe it's a spiritual curse. I knew those myths could only be changed through awareness. My first act of giving back began right in my own village, Putheya. During my second long holiday from the University of Malawi, I returned home and noticed that several children in the area often coughed or struggled with shortness of breath, especially during the cold season. Their parents usually gave them home remedies or herbs but never took them for proper medical checkups. I recognised the signs because I had lived them. One Sunday after church, I asked the village headman for permission to speak to the community. He agreed, and we gathered under a large mango tree men, women, and children sitting on mats, curious to hear what I had to say. I introduced myself, then began to talk about

asthma in simple language. I explained that it was a condition affecting the lungs, not witchcraft. I demonstrated how to use an inhaler, using mine as an example. I also talked about triggers like dust and smoke, and why keeping houses clean could help.

The people listened attentively. Some nodded in understanding, others asked questions. An old woman stood up and said, “So you mean it’s not demons causing it?” I smiled and said, “No, it’s not demons it’s just the body reacting in a certain way. With medicine and care, people can live long and healthy lives.” The meeting ended with applause, and I felt a warmth in my heart that no medicine could match.

That day, I realised that awareness is a powerful form of healing. Many people simply lack information. When they understand what’s happening in their bodies, they can seek help and live better. From then on, I decided to use every opportunity I had through writing, speaking, and community service to teach about asthma.

Later, I started collaborating with a few local health workers. Together, we organised small awareness sessions at schools and churches. We shared pamphlets, demonstrated how to respond during an asthma attack, and encouraged people to visit hospitals for checkups instead of relying only on traditional remedies. Some clinics even

invited me to speak as a patient ambassador a title that humbled me deeply.

One thing I noticed during these outreach programs was how grateful people were to hear a voice they could relate to. I wasn't a foreign doctor speaking medical jargon I was one of them, a son of the soil, sharing lived experience. That connection made the message powerful. When people see someone who has walked their path and survived, they listen differently.

Through these community efforts, I learned something profound: awareness doesn't just save lives; it builds dignity. It helps people see illness not as shame, but as a challenge that can be faced with courage and care. It also reminded me that my education wasn't just for me it was a tool for change.

Each time I stand before a group, telling my story, I think of the boy I once was small, weak, and frightened. I wish someone had told him that one day, he would use the same breath that struggled for life to teach others how to live. In giving back, I found purpose beyond my pain.

Challenges and Breakthroughs

Even as my awareness work grew, life didn't suddenly become easy. Living with asthma has always been a journey of highs and lows. There were times when I felt unstoppable, and others when I felt trapped inside my own body.

One of my biggest challenges has been unpredictability. Asthma doesn't follow a schedule. Some mornings I wake up full of energy; other times, I open my eyes and know immediately that it's going to be a difficult day. The weather, the air quality, even stress all can change how I breathe. It's like walking on a path with invisible stones; you never know when you'll stumble.

At university, the cold Zomba winds are a constant battle. During the rainy season, I often need to wear extra layers of clothing just to keep warm. There are nights when the air grew damp, and my chest tightened as if someone was pressing on it. I learned to always keep my inhaler close under my pillow, in my pocket, even on the desk while I studied.

But the physical side was only part of it. The emotional toll was equally heavy. There are moments of frustration when I watch others live

freely, running, dancing, playing football, while I sat on the sidelines. I used to wonder, Why me? Why was I chosen to live with a condition that made every breath feel borrowed?

Those thoughts could easily pull me into sadness, but I found ways to fight back. Writing became my therapy. Whenever I felt weak, I poured my feelings onto paper the fear, the pain, the gratitude. Sometimes I wrote poetry; other times, I wrote journal entries that no one else would ever read. The act of writing reminded me that my struggle had meaning.

Support from friends also carried me through tough times. I remember one night in my second year when I had an attack. My friend, Olivia, stayed up with me until morning, helping me breathe and even skipping her early lecture just to make sure I was okay. I still tell people that kindness like that is medicine no hospital can prescribe.

My faith also played a huge role. I grew up in a Roman Catholic Christian family, I later associate myself with Every Nation Campus Ministry under brother Ben Bakali where I strengthened my spiritual life and prayer has always been part of my lives. Whenever I felt like giving up, I remembered my parents' words: "God gives His hardest battles to those He trusts to overcome them." I carried that belief with me.

Each time I recovered from an attack, I whispered a prayer of thanks. I began to see my condition not just as suffering, but as a testimony proof that even broken lungs can hold strong spirits.

Financial challenges added another layer of difficulty. Medication is costly, and sometimes my family have to sacrifice other needs to keep me supplied. I will never forget one semester when my mother sold part of her maize harvest to buy my pills. When I protested, she said, "Food feeds the body, but breath gives life. We can always grow maize again." That moment taught me the true meaning of love and sacrifice.

Despite all these challenges, there have been breakthroughs too. I've learned resilience, discipline, and empathy qualities I might never have developed otherwise. Asthma taught me to value small things: the first deep breath after an attack, the feeling of clean morning air, the joy of laughter without coughing. These moments, though simple, are treasures.

Each year, I grow more confident in my ability to manage the condition. I've spoken at small community events, written articles, and even inspired younger students living with chronic illnesses. Sometimes, people write to me saying, "Your story gave me hope." That, to me, is the

greatest reward knowing that my suffering wasn't wasted.

Asthma continues to test me, but I no longer see it as an enemy. It is part of me the wind that shaped my path, the teacher that refined my spirit. It taught me patience, gratitude, and strength. And above all, it taught me that every breath no matter how hard won is a gift worth protecting.

Finding My Purpose Through Communication

When I first arrived at the University of Malawi, I was uncertain about where life would lead me. My childhood dream had been to become a surgeon. I loved the idea of saving lives with my own hands. But as I grew older and learnt more about my health limitations the chemicals, the long hours in operating theatres, and the physical strain I realised that dream no longer matched my reality. Letting go of that dream was painful. For years I had pictured myself wearing a white coat and standing under bright lights, steady hands performing miracles. Accepting that my asthma would not allow that path felt like a personal defeat. Yet, looking back, I now see that moment as a turning point rather than an ending.

Communication had always come naturally to me. I loved telling stories, explaining things, and helping people understand. During secondary school I enjoyed debates and writing essays. At university I decided to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in Communication and Cultural Studies, now I'm majoring in Broadcasting. I didn't fully grasp it at the time, but this course would become the perfect bridge between my experiences and my purpose.

Broadcasting, at its heart, is about giving voice to the voiceless. It is about turning stories often silent ones into messages that move people. My own story was exactly that: a voice shaped by breath, by struggle, by hope. Through communication, I discovered a way to combine my life's challenges with my passion for education and awareness.

In one of our early classes, our lecturer Mr. Stanley Chakandikana asked us to prepare a short topic close to our hearts for Creative Writing course assignment. I chose asthma awareness. I spent days preparing, writing a script in both English and Chichewa, making sure every word was clear but sincere. When the assignment finally marked, I checked with tears in my eyes. For the another time, I saw my writing carrying not just sound but purpose.

The feedback was overwhelming. Lecturer commended me for writing so openly about a personal struggle. Some students approached me later to share their own health battles epilepsy, diabetes, depression. That's when I realised how powerful honest communication can be. It connects us in ways that statistics or textbooks never could. Since then, I have continued to blend my studies with advocacy. I have produced short awareness programmes, written feature articles, and taken

part in events on health and wellness. My lecturers often say, “Blessings, your work carries heart.” I believe that is because it comes from a place of lived experience.

Asthma may have closed one door, but it opened another far wider. Through communication, I have found a way to heal not only myself but also others. Every story I tell, every message I record, feels like an act of breathing steady, deliberate, full of meaning.

Lessons, Hopes, and the Road Ahead

Now, as I look back from where I started the tiny ward at Chiradzulu District Hospital, the dusty paths of Putheya Village, the classrooms of Chipere Primary and Malimba Secondary I can see how every step, no matter how small, led me here. The journey has not been easy, but it has been blessed.

Living with asthma has taught me lessons no classroom could ever offer. The first lesson is patience. Breathing, something most people take for granted, taught me to slow down and listen to my body. I learnt that progress is not measured by speed but by consistency. Whether in health, education, or relationships, patience remains my quiet strength.

The second lesson is gratitude. I have learnt to be thankful for every calm night, every morning without wheezing, every journey made without interruption. Gratitude turns even ordinary moments into victories.

The third lesson is resilience. There were days I wanted to give up when the attacks were frequent, when medication was scarce, when studies felt overwhelming. But each time, I reminded myself that the storm always passes. Breathing against

the wind doesn't mean defeating it; it means standing firm until it softens.

Looking ahead, my dream is to create a national awareness programme a platform where people can learn about asthma and other chronic illnesses in simple, relatable language. I want to work with hospitals, schools, and media houses to spread practical information about prevention, treatment, and emotional support. I also hope to mentor young students living with health conditions, showing them that they, too, can succeed.

I imagine one day hosting a radio programme called Breathing Matters, where people share stories of survival and resilience. Through broadcasting, I want to give the microphone to those who often go unheard the villagers, the children, the families who quietly fight daily battles with illness and poverty.

Asthma no longer defines me; it refines me. It has shaped how I see the world fragile yet full of strength. I may still have moments of struggle, but they no longer scare me. Instead, they remind me of how far I've come.

If there's one thing I've learnt, it's that life's limitations are often hidden opportunities. What we think breaks us sometimes builds us stronger.

The breath I once feared losing has become the very rhythm that drives my purpose.

To anyone reading this book whether you live with asthma, know someone who does, or simply wish to understand my message is simple: hope lives in every breath.

Asthma is not the end of the road. It is a journey that demands understanding, discipline, and courage. The attacks may come, but they don't have to define you. With proper care, awareness, and support, you can live fully, dream boldly, and achieve greatly.

I have learnt that health is not merely the absence of illness; it is the presence of balance physical, emotional, and spiritual. Taking medication, avoiding triggers, exercising wisely, and eating well are all part of self love. But equally important is believing that you deserve wellness.

To parents raising children with asthma, never give up. Your patience and love can turn fear into confidence. To teachers, friends, and communities, please show kindness and understanding. Sometimes, a little empathy is all it takes to make breathing easier for someone.

As for me, I will continue walking this path sometimes against the wind, sometimes with it always thankful for the gift of life. I dream of a Malawi where no child feels ashamed of their inhaler, where hospitals are well equipped, and where knowledge replaces fear.

When you next take a deep breath, remember that it is more than just air. It is a reminder that you are alive, capable, and worthy of every moment. Keep breathing, even when the wind is strong. Keep believing, even when the path is rough. For as long as you can breathe, you can rise.

A dark, moody photograph of a forest. A large, dark tree trunk is prominent in the foreground, running vertically. The background is filled with dense evergreen trees, partially obscured by a thick mist or fog, creating a sense of depth and atmosphere. The overall color palette is dark, with shades of green, brown, and grey.

Blessings Bakali
2025